

Spy-plane photos help firefighters

By George Raine
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SAN FRANCISCO — Frustrated by smoke blocking their view of the wildfires they are fighting, California forestry officials have secured a promise from NASA that it will provide them with infrared photographs taken from the descendant of a spy plane at 65,000 feet.

The plan is to use the photos taken from an ER-2 aircraft, a larger version of the U-2, to help fight fires in Lake County and elsewhere in California.

Seconds after they are taken, the images will be delivered to NASA's Ames Research Station at Moffett Field in Mountain View, Calif., via the satellite system that supports the space shuttle. They will be relayed on the Internet to California Department of Forestry offices in Sacramento and firefighting camps at Redding and Riverside.

Speed is critical because firefighting managers must make quick decisions about strategy and allocation of resources between fires, said Dana Cole, a Department of Forestry fire planner.

"We got started on this when Lake County was socked in," Mr. Cole



Firefighters, such as these at Oregon's Warm Springs Indian Reservation, may soon have some help from above. AP

said. "We could not get answers to questions such as what the status of the fire was now, where were the hot spots, where we were going to need resources."

Firefighters will quickly learn the scope, parameters and effectiveness of their efforts. Moreover, it will be possible to infer the intensity of hot spots in the images.

"We've done this on helicopters, but if the smoke is blinding you, and you cannot get high enough, you don't get the job done," Mr. Cole

said.

There's another bonus: It's free. The work is considered a demonstration flight by NASA.

"We think we can deliver the imagery into the hands of [the firefighters] within seconds of acquisition, and, of course, this could be anywhere in the world, and they could put it out on the Internet," said John Arvesen, the high altitude branch chief at NASA-Ames. "Maybe we can save some property."